DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 379 SP 040 533

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TITLE	Asian-American Teachers: Issues of Support.
PUB DATE	2000-10-00
NOTE	13p.; Paper prsented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 25-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Asian Americans; College Faculty; Cultural Differences; Diversity (Faculty); Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnicity; Higher Education; *Minority Group Teachers; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This study examined problems Asian-Americans faced as minority teachers, the impact those problems had on curriculum and academic experiences, and support systems available to them. Participants were Asian-American teachers from an Indiana State Department of Education list who responded to a survey about their decision to become a teacher; who supported them or opposed them; issues of identity as Asian Americans; perceptions of the effect of their ethnicity on the curriculum and related school activities; peer, administrator, student, and parent acceptance of their identity; and support available. Results indicated that Asian-American teachers were well integrated into the school system and felt accepted and supported in general. They believed that their concerns were heard and that teachers and administrators supported them. Their integration appeared to depend upon how mainstream they were. One-third of the respondents were not conscious of their ethnicity or chose not to focus on it. While some Asian-American teachers capitalized on their ethnicity and made it a focal point of their profession, most did not. Their attitudes indicated a desire to be like the majority and to assimilate and nullify their Asian roots. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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ASIAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS: ISSUES OF SUPPORT

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Educational Research Association, Chicago, October 25 - 28, 2000.

SP040533

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ASIAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS: ISSUES OF SUPPORT

In the past three decades, the Asian-American population has been notable as the "model minority" but overlooked in terms of the demographic profile in spite of a dramatic increase by 63%, making Asian Americans the fastest growing of all the major racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. Nearly a fourth of Asian-American are under 17 and of school-going age. This is mirrored in the number of Asian-American students entering U.S. schools. From 1976 to 1990, the percentage of Asian/Pacific-Islanders enrolled in the U.S. schools increased by approximately 158% to a total of 3% of the total K-12 student population. (Smith, Rogers, Alsalam, Perie, Mahoney and Martin, 1994). The number of students of color entering teacher education has increased over the last decade. In schools, colleges and departments of education, from 1989-1991, Asian/Pacific Islanders enrollments increased by 22% (AACTE, 1994). By 1990. this group made up 2.8% of the overall U.S. labor force and 3.2% of children between the ages of 3 and 17 but only 1.2% of the nation's teaching force (Snyder & Hoffman, 1994). But this has not been enough to keep pace with the dramatic changes in the K-12 classrooms. Thus the proportion of Asian-American teachers has decreased as the number of Asian-American students has doubled every decade since 1970.

There is no scarcity of qualified persons in a community in which 37% aged 25 or older hold a college degree. In a Midwestern state of the 1% of the population of Asian-Americans, an astonishing 53% are college educated and make up 10% of all scientific hire in the state (Indianapolis, Star/News, 1999). Yet, specifically among Asian-American women who hold degrees, only 5% go into teaching, a profession still dominated by women. Many of the rest opt for jobs in technical and scientific fields which are higher-paying and where discrimination is perceived to be less of a barrier to advancement (Su, Goldstein, Suzuki & Kim, 1997).

The contribution that Asian-American educators could make is considerable. Recruiting them in to the profession may be a way of easing chronic shortage of teachers in the areas of science in math. Asian-Americans' expertise in science and math fields could increase the supply of teachers in those subject areas (Rong & Preissle, 1997).

Over the past two decades, 66% of Asian-Americans have been foreign-born – the highest percentage of any minority group (Rong & Preissle, 1997). For the 3.2% students who are Asian-American, teachers of similar backgrounds can ease the adjustment to school by serving as cultural mediators.

Several suggestions have been made to attract more Asian-Americans to teaching. These include: higher pay, grants and loans for Asian education school students, school-system sponsored outreach programs to the Asian-American community, and programs for Asian-American professionals looking to change careers. It has also been recommended that tapping into the pool of 350,000 Asian foreign students enrolled in American universities may provide a solution to teacher shortage(Su, Goldstein, Suzuki & Kim, 1997).

For cultural and demographic reasons, shoring up the supply of teachers from this minority group may be more complicated than many policymakers realize. Cultural values held by Asian-Americans considered in relation to their educational and occupational goals may explain this situation (Morishima & Mizokawa, 1980). In their county of origin, Asian-Americans are proud of the teaching professions. However, they are also concerned with professional status. In making career decisions in the U.S., they are significantly affected by the low professional status of teaching and worried about the public perception of teaching conditions (Su, 1997).

Among all ethnic groups, the least research has been done with Asian-American teachers. The limited data focus on issues of motivation, explaining why Asian-Americans are drawn to teaching and

what may keep them in the profession. There are no studies that address the impact of Asian-American teachers in the work environment and the effect they may have on the curriculum. Neither are there studies that address the problems that Asian-Americans may have once they are in the profession or the issues they may have to deal with in their work environment.

The purpose of this descriptive study was 1) to understand problems Asian-Americans may face as minority teachers; 2) to examine any impact they may have on curricula and academic experiences at the building level, and 3) to identify support systems available to them to implement desired changes.

Methodology

The Midwestern state chosen for study mirrored the changing national demographics with regard to the Asian-American population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). A list of all Asian-American teachers, obtained from the state Department of Education, provided an initial sampling frame of 106. deletion of those no longer teaching and additions of names suggested by respondents defined a final sample of 96.

A survey of 23 item, including six closed questions and 17 open-ended items, based on the research questions was designed. Eight items related to the respondents' decision to become teachers, and who supported or were opposed to this decision. Fifteen dealt with issues of identity of the Asian-American teachers and other professionals in the building. Five items explored the respondents' perceptions of the effect of their ethnicity on the curriculum and related activities in school. Seven items focussed on how peers, administrators, students and their parents related to issues of acceptance of their identity, and support that was or could be offered. Three items questioned the respondents about on their awareness and membership of professional ethnic support groups. Since the sampling frame of Asian-American teachers available was small, to test for a minority perspective the survey was piloted with African-American teachers. The final survey, with a cover letter and a stamped envelope for returning

the completed survey, was mailed to all participants. Reminders over a period of two months included postcards, phone calls and duplicate surveys.

Forty participants responded to the survey for a return rate of 41.7%. Four of them declined to participate; they felt their ethnic identity as Asian-Americans was not relevant to their identity as teachers. Another respondent stated that since he was mistaken for a Caucasian, his responses were not relevant. A sixth respondent chose not to complete the survey since the questions dealt with "delicate issues." Eventually 34 surveys were deemed useable. The data were coded and categorized by the researcher using open coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings:

Reasons for teaching

Asian-Americans become teachers for a variety or reasons, as do other teachers. More than half the respondents specifically stated that they chose to become teachers because they love children. Another major reason appears to be their faith in their ability to be good teachers. They believe they have the characteristics to be a good teacher.

Teaching is also seen as a suitable profession for woman with a family. The vacation time and the "summers off" help them balance a family life and a career. The long summer vacation enables them to go back to their country of origin to visit family and friends there.

For of the respondents identified having a "service mentality." Combined with the view of teaching as a "respectable" professions, it appears to be a good choice for them.

Curricular issues

The presence of Asian-American teachers appears to have little effect on the curriculum or the academic experiences of students. Core content courses are not affected by the ethnicity of the teacher. However, many teachers use them as resources and invite them to talk to their class. Asian-American

music teachers may build non-Western songs into their repertoire but these are with a multicultural focus and do not necessarily relate to the teacher's ethnic background or provide the students an introduction to any other style of music.

Issues of support

Family

Family support for the decision to become a teacher appears to be important though it does not seem to be a decisive factor. Ten respondents said that the opinion of family members had no bearing on their decision to teach. As one respondent said, "(Deciding to be a teacher) was not a difficult or unpleasant experience. I am a very strong-willed person who at the time didn't put a lot of weight on my parents' approval."

Of the parents it is the mother who appeared to be more supportive of the decision. Nineteen out of 32 respondents stated that while both parents were very supportive of their decision to become a teacher, it was their mothers who were more supportive than their fathers. Spouses and significant others were also identified as supportive of the idea.

If any one raised an objection to their becoming a teacher, it was the father. Four respondents indicated that their fathers were strongly opposed to their choice of profession.

The main objections raised centered around lack of money and lack of respect. The respondents were encouraged to "pursue a more lucrative field." Six of them indicated that they would like more financial support in completing their education. As deterrent to entering the profession, respondents also stated that they were told that they had "better potential" and were "smart enough to do anything," not just teaching.

Administrators and peers

The needs of Asian-American teachers are generic teacher needs in the areas of teaching, curriculum and discipline and they appreciate the support they receive from both administrators and their peers.

Of the 32 respondents to these set of questions, 15 stated that they were supported by their peers in two areas: professional and personal, while 12 felt that they were not supported. As in the case of two respondents, being asked to teach languages or subjects related to their ethnicity were seen as expressions of appreciation. Five respondents explicitly stated that teachers use them as a resource and invite them to talk to their classes on topics related to their ethnicity. A Japanese-American was asked by his peers to talk to their classes about the experiences of Japanese-Americans interned in concentration camps in the U.S. during World War II. Another respondent was asked by her peers to share her wedding photographs and to explain the cultural significance of certain rituals.

At a personal level, some felt that they had strong personal connection with their peers who helped them through "good times and bad."

However, one respondent believed that there was a danger of "being tokenized or less than appreciated because the teachers may have little understanding of non-mainstream experiences." So long as they have "the mannerisms of a Midwestern mainstream person," they feel accepted. This sentiment appears to be reflected in the case of one respondent whose Asian-American identity was not marked and was often mistaken for a Caucasian.

Students

Fully a third of the respondents indicated that their ethnic identity did not impinge itself on the students. They believe that they are successful teachers because they are like any other teachers and exhibit the same characteristics of concern and caring. As one respondent colorfully phrased it, "I could

be purple and still (the students) would enjoy my class, hopefully because I teach with caring and love." Another respondent commented, "More than 80% of my students and parents like and appreciate the things I'm doing to help my students learn. I use my lunch hour to help the slow students. I always find time to help my students."

Two clear statements made by the respondents point to their belief that students strongly identify with the teacher's minority status. They "appreciate the fact that (the teacher) can connect with them in different ways… can talk about skin color and speaking languages other than English with a certain depth of understanding."

Respondents were also subliminally conscious that students' perceptions of race and ability are influenced by the teacher's ethnicity. As one respondent said, "My students realize that teachers don't just come in black and white background. Anyone with the right qualifications (education) can become a teacher."

The most common expression of interest and appreciation appears to be how students notice the difference in their teachers who are Asian-American. Ss' curiosity is piqued by their teacher's ethnicity and teachers saw this as an indication of a positive attitude. Ss ask their teachers about theory personal background and culture, and teachers sometimes felt that students "look to me as a source of information about Asia." This curiosity is also about the country of origin." They love to see some real samples from China/Taiwan and hear about the Chinese zodiac.

Professional support groups

There are two professional organizations that are based on Asian-American ethnicity one is the Chinese Language Teachers Association and the other is an organization fro music teachers founded by one of the respondents.

But neither of these appears to be available to Asian-American teachers around the state. Except for two respondents, the other 32 stated that they had no knowledge of any groups that addressed issues they thought particular to Asian-American teachers. Any groups available were identified by them as social rather than professional support systems.

Teachers feel the need for such support systems as would help them in their professional life. Eighteen of the respondents indicated that they would join a group that addressed Asian-American issues related to teaching and teachers while 9 did not wish to be part of any group.

Discussion and Conclusions

Asian-American teachers appear to be well integrated into the school system. They feel they are accepted and supported for the most part. Their concerns are heard and they feel that teachers and administrators support them.

But the question remains about the effect of their ethnicity. Tuan's theory (1998) that if Asian-American are not to remain "forever foreigners" they would have to be "honorary whites" seems to hold true for Asian-American teachers. But their integration seems to depend on how mainstream they are, which argues for assimilation not accommodation. Since this is a major bone of contention in building cultural identity, the issue needs to be further explored if Asian-American teachers are to be an integral part of the educational scene. A significant third of them are either not conscious of their ethnicity or choose not to bring it into play. Their claim to be Caucasian or mainstream distinguishes them from those who would like to see their ethnicity as a strength and would like active support from their peers to explore it. If as Tuan (1998) claims (an assumption of foreignness clings to them," their ostrich act may not be the most effective or productive way of dealing with their identity.

However, some Asian-American teachers do not appear to believe that they have the plethora of "ethnic options" (Water, 1990) that Caucasians seem to have. They appear to need to adopt cultural white values and identities if they are to be successful and accepted in the school community.

Another question to consider is whether Asian-American teachers are really acclimated into the workplace or whether they are adopting the rule that many Asian-Americans did to get by in a racist society – stay quiet, behave and nobody bothers you (Tuan, 1998). The responses indicate that while some Asian-American teachers capitalize on their ethnicity and make it a focal point of their profession, most do not. The attitude of Asian-American teachers seems to indicate a desire to be like the majority, to assimilate and nullify their Asian roots.

It remains to be seen what the map of a school would look like if Asian-American teachers were to emphasize their ethnicity and not conform to the generic role teachers are expected to play in a school. That one participant would not respond to an anonymous survey conducted by an outsider indicates a high degree of discomfort with their origin in the workplace.

Gordon (1964) contends that ethnic organization exist in part because of the prejudice of the majority and in part because of the desire of the community to maintain its identity. Professional support groups may help Asian-American teachers retain their cultural and ethnic identity without jeopardizing their career or professional status.

It is heartening, however, that many Asian-American teachers choose not to make their ethnic identity their private affair, which indeed it is not. They recognize that they are a "salient marker" (Tuan, 1998) to their students and other stakeholders.

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